

Business benefits when workers play



Alex Eggleston '00 (left) and Michael Svac want to unleash the inner athlete in everyone.

In his management positions at Xerox and General Electric (GE), Alex Eggleston '00 (EMBA) was continually charged with getting and keeping people engaged in their work.

It occurred to him that incorporating sports-based team competition with key workplace tasks could be a great way to improve employee morale and performance. When he read that fantasy football was costing employers millions of dollars each week in lost employee productivity, he knew he was onto something.

That idea led to First League LLC (www.FirstLeague.com), founded by Eggleston and his longtime friend, Michael Svac. The company slogan: "Play that Works."

"We take a team concept that everybody can understand and add a sports theme," explains Eggleston. "The structure gives every employee the opportunity to excel and make a significant work contribution – and have fun doing it."

Here's how it works: First League client companies determine their business objectives for the game – how the employee players will make points. Objectives could be increased sales calls, reduced in-process errors or improved product quality – "whatever activities the business deems important to their bottom line," says Eggleston. These become the basis of the customized score sheet.

"Coaches," selected by the business, require minimal training on the Web-based

tool – it's easy to navigate. The coaches "draft" their employee players. Teams, typically five to 10 people, compete in a league structure. "Games" are scheduled based on the length of the "season" as determined by the business.

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Coaches have the responsibility for recording the points earned by each player, and a "commissioner" confirms that the information is accurate. Everything is done online. Participants can track the standings of teams and individuals as the season progresses.

"The league structure is very dynamic," says Eggleston. "Things can change from week to week, and teams have the ability to improve their scores and win games."

First League's patent-pending software keeps track of all aspects of the virtual leagues. "The tool does the work," says

Svac. "The client just plays the game. It can be customized any way they want."

"We tell our clients this is an 'engagement tool,'" Eggleston says. "Other types of incentive programs tend to start off with a lot of enthusiasm, then taper off. With this, interest builds as the season progresses."

Eggleston, a native of New Castle, Pa., and Pittsburgh native Svac met 20 years ago at Indiana University of Pennsylvania, where both were studying safety engineering. Both went to work at Xerox in Rochester on the same day. Job changes took them to different locations, but they often talked about going into business together.

Eggleston says he literally woke up one morning with the First League concept in his head. When he explained it to his friend, "I was on board in an hour," says Svac.

First League began to take shape in August 2005, when Eggleston and Svac began working with System Innovations in Charlotte, N.C., to develop the software. In 2006, the partners began selling the new service application at various conferences and trade shows, and last September First League won the 2006 Innovative Product Award at the annual international Motivation Show in Chicago with 15,000 in attendance.

In April of last year Eggleston left GE to pursue the new business full-time. Clients, who have used the program with groups ranging in size from 65 to 500 employees,

include divisions of Chevron, International Paper, GE, and Johnson & Johnson. Svac says the concept can work with any organization, including schools or service agencies.

"Our challenge is getting the word out," says Eggleston. "It's not easy starting a business, but we believe in this. In today's business world, where everything is a commodity, the only thing that differentiates you is your people. We're tapping into something – an innate competitiveness – that's already there. This could make a positive difference for a lot of people."